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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 001516

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [CASC](#) [KIRF](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: CHRISTIANS IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: A. KABUL 01428
[B](#). KABUL 01380
[C](#). KABUL 01346
[D](#). KABUL 01332
[E](#). KABUL 01302
[F](#). KABUL 01291
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[H](#). KABUL 01280
[I](#). KABUL 01268

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RONALD NEUMANN FOR REASONS 1.4 (C) AND (D)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: After asylum was granted to Abdul Rahman in Italy, attention has shifted towards the greater Christian experience in Afghanistan. Afghan Christians, in large part remain hidden due to the risk of discrimination and violence. No new immediate threat to non-Afghan Christians appears to have surfaced. The public debate looks likely to continue with the opening of a &Christian Fellowship⁸ coffeehouse or potential inter-faith marriages. END SUMMARY.

Rahman Case Update

[2](#). (C) Public rhetoric, thus far, has been surprisingly muted. Friday prayers were an opportunity for clerics to denigrate the West,s alleged interference in the Rahman case. A cleric in Mazar-i-Sharif accused the international community of interfering with Afghan internal and judicial affairs as well as undermining Islam and their constitution. Some in Ghazni alleged that this interference was the start of a Western &Crusade.⁸ Nevertheless, it appears that Chief Justice Shinwari has used his influence with the mullahs to dampen protests -- something President Karzai told the Ambassador he was grateful for.

[3](#). (C) Lapis crosses are sold in Afghan bazaars and Bibles in Dari are being quietly distributed. There are clearly segments of the population that have no problem with Christianity or Christian symbolism. The educated community seems to have a genuine acceptance of other religions. Afghans whose livelihoods depend on business with foreigners also do appear, at least superficially, to be accepting of their customers; it is unclear how self-selecting this group is. Conversely, the less educated tend to follow their religious leaders. International pressure can force the discussion but it can also fuel extremist rhetoric and make government officials appear weak. With the February Danish cartoon protests and last Fall,s Nasab &blasphemy⁸ case still fresh in the public consciousness, the Rahman incident stands out because of Shinwari,s apparent call to the mullahs for restraint (though he may have actually been the one

who encouraged the case early on.) We believe there are still those who would use religion to incite the population whether on purely religious grounds or for political gain. Privately Afghan officials have told us that they support the protection of religious freedom in Afghanistan, however public pressure, from the US and other Western countries, can limit their options for progress on this front.

Afghan Christians

¶4. (SBU) Embassy queries indicate that though a small minority of Afghan Christians exists, they keep an intentionally low profile to avoid persecution or harassment. Estimates on their numbers vary greatly ranging from 3,000 to 10,000. One may not even know that his long-time neighbor is a Christian. Most Christians appear to have converted outside of the country; some say up to 3,000 in Pakistan. There also seems to be a group of Afghans that converted to Christianity during British rule. No estimates exist as to the number of recent domestic conversions. Moreover, we cannot confirm the estimates people offer) there are many long-time Afghan experts with wide ranging contacts and years of experience who say they have never met an Afghan convert to Christianity.

¶5. (SBU) The consular section receives occasional letters from Afghans professing to be Christian and asking how they can go to the US. The consular section refers them to UNHCR. Most inquirers feel the need to state that they hate Muslims which seems to be related to an apocryphal test of loyalty during Communist times of being required to step on the Koran before

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being allowed to join the Party.

Non-Afghan Christians

¶6. (SBU) The Rahman case has not appeared to spur any additional immediate threat to the safety of non-Afghan Christians. No apparent action is being taken against this community and they are being allowed to practice their religion freely as long as they do not try to include Afghans in their services. Christian services are regularly held around Kabul for foreigners. At least one church has a Friday School for the congregation's children.

¶7. (C) By coincidence, the consular section recently received an inquiry from an American woman in Kabul who plans to marry an Afghan man, and wanted to know whether it was possible to have a legal marriage performed if both participants were Christian. On April 3, the Vice Consul discussed marriage regulations with the head and other officials of the Afghan Family Court. According to the court, a mixed-faith marriage can only be among two foreigners or a Muslim man and non-Muslim woman. In the latter case, the marriage ceremony must be Islamic.

Missionaries

¶8. (C) Missionaries could well be the next flash point for this ongoing debate. Though here for a variety of reasons on paper, it is clear that there are Christians in Afghanistan who are actively trying to convert Afghans. The Consular Section is aware of American citizens in country who appear to be affiliated with a faith-based organization. It appears that, as in some other countries, many missionaries and others connected with missionary organizations have their private support networks and do not register with the Embassy. Anecdotally, the Consular Section understands that

some of these organizations, whose roots go back as far as two or three decades, may cycle through American staff on a short term basis. There may be American missionaries who come to Afghanistan frequently but for short periods of time over the course of several years. When asked at a press roundtable about Christian evangelists in Afghanistan, Ambassador Neumann explained that we believe in freedom of religion and that we have a consular responsibility to protect Americans. He emphasized that many countries have laws restricting proselytizing and that we warn Americans about these restrictions. (Note: Under &Criminal Penalties,8 the Consular Information Sheet for Afghanistan says, &Another potentially sensitive activity is proselytizing. Although the new Afghan Constitution allows the free exercise of religion, proselytizing may be viewed as contrary to the beliefs of Islam and considered harmful to society.8 End Note.)

¶9. (C) There seem to be discreet efforts on the part of some NGO workers to introduce Christianity to those they work with. Most recently, American citizen, David Michael (STRICTLY PROTECT), is reportedly leading an NGO group preparing to open a public &Christian Fellowship8 coffeehouse) &Chaila8 (Dari for &grape arbor8)) in Kabul,s Karte-e-se District. Although the coffeehouse will not be overtly Christian in character, our contact said that organizers are &spoiling for a fight8 in light of the Rahman Case and that they plan to offer Christian-themed programs for both foreigners and Afghans. Mr. Michael reportedly told our contact that there is a &sizable8 group of underground Afghan Christians in Kabul who will encourage Muslim Afghans to patronize the establishment. The facility is near completion and slated to open in the next week or so for evening and weekend Christian Fellowship. Government officials have related unofficially that they will likely allow the coffeehouse to open but will then immediately close it for lacking a license. This aggressive attitude contrasts with other comments we have heard from Western Christians. One Western official told Consul she attends the local &International Church8 which is so crowded it holds two services. She said that the congregation discourages Afghan worshippers out of concern for their safety. On her first visit, she said, some members of the congregation expressed displeasure because an Afghan driver dropped her off.

¶10. (C) One locally employed staff member related that

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American family friends he knows well bring him a Dari language Bible each time they visit Afghanistan. Others related stories of international aid workers befriending Afghan families and then attempting to convert them. The extent to which proselytizing occurs in Afghanistan is hard to determine because, in most cases, it is done secretly.

Comment

¶11. (C) The Embassy continues to follow the Rahman case closely. The immediate impact of the Rahman case on Christians in Afghanistan appears to be limited, but the situation remains susceptible to manipulation by extremists and the GOA is fully alert to this. The presence of missionaries and their continued efforts to convert Afghan Muslims could well be the next issue to arise. The Christian Fellowship coffeehouse will be paid close attention to by the Embassy. Some parliamentarians and other government officials seem to support the protection of religious freedoms but have criticized foreign pressure that limits their options. We will continue to push the Government

of Afghanistan for the protection of religious
freedom through quiet diplomacy.
Neumann